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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [KCRM](#) [PHUM](#) [KJUS](#) [KDEM](#) [ETRD](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: BANANA WORKERS UNION CO-FOUNDER MURDERED IN
SOUTHERN GUATEMALA

REF: 07 GUATEMALA 2172

Classified By: Ambassador James Derham for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (U) Summary: On March 2, Miguel Angel Ramirez, co-founder and organizer of the recently formed Banana Workers Union of the South (SITRABANSUR) at Chiquita banana-producing Olga Maria Farm, was killed at home by unidentified armed assailants who broke into his house. Ramirez' murder occurred less than a month after the February 2 rape and assault of Sandra Isabel Ramirez, the daughter of the SITRABANSUR Secretary General, and less than four months after legal recognition of the union. End Summary.

Murder of Union Co-founder

12. (U) On March , unidentified armed assailants broke into the hme of Miguel Angel Ramirez, co-founder and organizer of the Banana Workers Union of the South (SITRABANSUR), and killed the union leader, according to SITRABANSUR. The union believes the murder was related to his union activities. Ramirez was actively involved in the formation and legal recognition of SITRABANSUR, which represents 24 of the 800 workers at Olga Maria banana farm, a property of International Frutera Company owned by Fernando Bolanos. The company is under contract to Chiquita to produce bananas.

13. (SBU) SITRABANSUR, an affiliate of the Guatemalan Labor Workers Union (UNSITRAGUA), was legally recognized and registered as a union by the Ministry of Labor in November 12007. Between July 15, 2007, when a group of workers of Olga Maria banana farm, including Ramirez, decided to organize themselves, and November 14, when the union was officially recognized, 15 union activists were dismissed. Subsequently, all the leaders and members of the union were dismissed. The union maintains the dismissals were illegal. The day after SITRABANSUR was officially recognized, representatives of International Frutera Company, through the company's private security force, reportedly initiated a series of acts of intimidation and harassment against union members and their families, including surveillance of their homes and work place.

Rape of Daughter of SITRABANSUR Secretary General

14. (C) On February 2, Sandra Isabel Ramirez, the 20-year-old adopted daughter of SITRABANSUR Secretary General German Aguilar Abrego, was raped and assaulted by four unidentified men, members of International Frutera Company's private security force according to the victim, as she was leaving work. The four men took her to nearby Semillero Beach, where they reportedly interrogated her about her father's union

activities, and then raped her. The victim and her mother did not immediately report the incident to authorities for fear of putting the SITRABANSUR Secretary General at risk.

15. (SBU) On February 11, SITRABANSUR, accompanied by the Human Rights Ombudsman, filed an official complaint with the Public Ministry. The Ministry reportedly indicated that it would not be able to conduct an effective investigation due to lack of evidence as a result of the lapse of time between the rape and when it was reported. On February 17, the collective "Women of UNSITRAGUA" denounced the rape and filed a complaint with the Public Ministry.

Plantation Owner: Union Murders Rare

16. (C) The AmCit owner of banana plantations that compete with Bolanos' approximately 16 banana farms -- including Olga QMaria Farm -- in supplying Chiquita (COBIGUA, S.A.) told Pol/Econ Couns that, while he acknowledged the possibility that Ramirez had been murdered for his union activities, such violent retaliation had become rare in the banana business. More often such murders could be attributed to other motives, particularly those stemming from private disagreements. Most plantation owners had established social welfare facilities (such as clinics), raised wages, and otherwise created benefits for farm workers in an effort to obviate violent employee-management conflicts. These efforts had for the most part been successful in meeting workers' demands, he said, and in the rare instances in which they had not, banana growers had found other ways of dealing with the most aggressive union leaders, including payoffs. A handful of banana worker unions were not pursuing traditional union objectives, he said, but rather had a hard-left political agenda, the ultimate objective of which was closure of large banana plantations. Banana producers found it impossible to

reach agreement with such activists. He also noted that most banana producers hire private security firms, given the unreliability of the Guatemalan police. Occasionally these firms employed violent means against perceived enemies in contravention of their employers' wishes.

Comment

17. (C) Guatemala's southern coast is home to 80 banana farms, including Olga Maria farm, and an estimated 70,000 banana workers. Tiquisate, the municipality where labor organizer Ramirez was murdered, has an estimated 15 banana farms, employing approximately 16,000 workers. Of the 80 farms, Olga Maria is the only unionized farm. Efforts to unionize other farms have resulted in termination of labor activists' employment. While it is possible that Ramirez was murdered for his union activities, the motives for his murder remain unclear. The AFL-CIO Solidarity Center is actively educating banana workers and employers on their labor rights and obligations as part of its DRL-funded labor capacity-building regional project to promote a culture of compliance with labor standards in Central America. The Center also receives USAID assistance.

Derham